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Friday, 12 December 2003, 10.30 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Tafrov	(Bulgaria)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Lucas
	Cameroon	Mr. Tidjani
	Chile	Mr. Muñoz
	China	Mr. Wang Guangya
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Germany	Mr. Trautwein
	Guinea	Mr. Sow
	Mexico	Mr. Pujalte
	Pakistan	Mr. Akram
	Russian Federation	Mr. Gatilov
	Spain	Mr. Arias
	Syrian Arab Republic	Mr. Mekdad
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Thomson
	United States of America	Mr. Negroponte

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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03-65053 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Roed-Larsen to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

Mr. Roed-Larsen: In the last two Secretariat briefings to the Security Council, we painted a bleak picture of the situation in the Middle East. A spate of violence in the summer and early autumn led to a stalemate in the peace process. Despite a lack of diplomatic progress, recent months have nonetheless been characterized by relative quiet on the ground — with no major terror attacks by Palestinians and a marked decline in Israeli military operations.

Once again, we have a narrow window of opportunity, one in which the parties need to take positive steps to truly put the peace process back on track. Each side has reiterated its commitment to the Quartet's road map, and now is the time for them to fulfil their road map obligations and take necessary, bold confidence-building measures to restore hope.

There are a number of factors behind the opening of this window. A new Palestinian government has taken office, led by a Prime Minister, Ahmed Qurei, who has a long history of negotiating with Israel. Since assuming office last month, he has reiterated the Palestinian Authority's full commitment to the road map and expressed a strong willingness to resume talks with Israeli authorities. We will fully support his efforts to implement the road map. We will also fully expect him to take steps to deal with violent groups. Notably, Mr. Qurei has been a consistent and forceful critic of Palestinian terrorist attacks.

Israeli Prime Minister Sharon has also made clear his desire to meet his Palestinian counterpart and restart the peace process, based on the Quartet's road map, to which he has committed himself on several occasions. We expect that on issues such as the barrier, settlement expansion and military actions that affect Palestinian civilians, Prime Minister Sharon's Government will act in ways that support the peace process. We remain willing to provide the help Israel might need to fulfil its road map obligations.

We applaud the Government of Egypt for its tireless efforts to secure a ceasefire by working with the Palestinian Authority and a variety of Palestinian groups. Though there has been no agreement reached as of yet, efforts continue and we hope they will soon lead to a full and lasting ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians.

Two praiseworthy civil society initiatives are under way that reflect a strong desire by both peoples for a just, lasting and secure end to this conflict. The Geneva Accord and the Peoples' Voice initiative have been widely lauded. A recent Israeli poll indicates that 75 per cent of the Jewish Israeli population in Israel supports holding negotiations for peace with the Palestinians; 65 per cent support the establishment of a Palestinian State in the context of advanced negotiations; about 60 per cent agree with the evacuation of Gaza and remote and isolated West Bank settlements.

While civil initiatives cannot substitute for the officials of the parties negotiating, they are significant indications that Israelis and Palestinians can work together to constructively bridge their differences. These initiatives and the poll results also show what we can all feel on the ground — an intense weariness of the current tragic state of affairs and a desire for real change.

Finally, the Security Council's endorsement of the road map in resolution 1515 (2003) is an extremely

positive step that deepens the international community's support of the peace process.

While it is tempting to be optimistic given the factors I have outlined, the current situation remains very fragile. So, where might it lead?

There appear to be four main possibilities.

First, if real negotiations restart but fail to revive the peace process, the risks are grave. Hopes will be dashed, leaders on both sides will find it extremely difficult to re-engage, and we could recede further into the darkness. Such a lack of progress would only strengthen the enemies of peace.

Secondly, some Israelis have recently proposed a unilateral withdrawal from parts of the occupied Palestinian territory. The Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon has been cited by some as a precedent for unilateralism. I think it is timely to recall that that withdrawal was not unilateral: it was carried out under Security Council supervision and with intense support from the United Nations Secretariat negotiating with both parties over the course of several months to draw up the so-called Blue Line. In that process, Israel complied fully with relevant Security Council resolutions.

The lesson from the Lebanon withdrawal is that international support can effectively facilitate Middle East peace efforts. Any withdrawal from occupied land is praiseworthy, but a unilateral withdrawal would contain problematic elements. It might be perceived by some that only force, violence and terror can create change and that it is not necessary to arrive at a peaceful settlement through negotiations underpinned by international legitimacy. It might be perceived by others that a partial unilateral withdrawal, from only some of the occupied Palestinian territory, would be enough to settle the issue once and for all. But a just and lasting peace can best be achieved by both sides working out a resolution across a negotiating table with the active support and involvement of the international community.

Thirdly, an "absolutist approach" based on the aforementioned civil society initiatives advocates an immediate and comprehensive resolution of the conflict. While these initiatives show us where we must go, they are not inconsistent with the road map and lend vital hope and sustenance to peacemaking efforts, I believe that even their framers realize that quick implementation is not possible, given the current political climate. In saying this, I am not at all dismissing the Geneva Accord or the Peoples' Voice principles. On the contrary, this sort of track-two activity gives vital reassurance that there may after all be a partner for peace on the other side.

That leaves us with the only viable route — a step-by-step approach assisted by bold confidence-building measures. In other words, bilateral negotiations based on the road map and facilitated by the international community. Under such an approach, Israelis and Palestinians need a determined and engaged international community, led by the Quartet, to help them return to the path to peace and, once there, stay on it. To that end, I met on Wednesday with my fellow Quartet envoys in Rome after an important high-level donor meeting. The Quartet will assist the nascent bilateral efforts currently under way and guide the parties in their implementation of the road map.

The issue today is how to spark the process. To do so, each of the parties will need to address the core concerns of the other side, which can roughly be defined as territory and terror. Israelis want an end to terrorism, leading to lasting and true security in a fully recognized State. Palestinians want to finally end the occupation with the confidence that they will have a truly viable and independent State. But to get on track, to fulfil these desires, both parties and the international community face fundamental dilemmas that must be overcome.

For Israelis, the closure system in the occupied Palestinian territory is a catch-22 situation that developed as a response to murderous terrorist attacks. They feel that if closures are eased, the potential for new terrorist attacks will rise. But if the closure persists, the living conditions and livelihood of the Palestinian population will only worsen. Israelis need to know that if they enter a process, they will find true security and recognition at the end and that they are not simply capitulating to the waves of terror attacks they have endured.

For Palestinians, this crisis is about more than the hardship they are enduring. Easing their plight is simply not enough. In their eyes, this crisis remains much more fundamental: it is a struggle for their identity and national aspirations. They need to know that if they enter a process, it has the end of the occupation and a viable, independent and sovereign

State as an end goal, and that they are not capitulating to the extremely damaging effects of Israeli security measures on their lives.

The donor community also faces a catch-22 situation: the more than $1 billion they provide annually undoubtedly helps alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people. However, in some eyes, this money helps subsidize an Israeli occupation that increases hardship for the average Palestinian. The donor community needs to know that, as they continue to provide such support, the parties will engage in a peace process that will pave the way to a full, just and lasting peace.

We can only proceed if these core issues and dilemmas are recognized and accepted as a reality by both parties and the international community. They must be addressed in parallel, not sequentially or with preconditions.

Since the last briefing to the Security Council, 27 people have lost their lives to the conflict — 24 Palestinians and 3 Israelis. It is a sign of the extent of the violence that has consumed Israelis and Palestinians that this death toll corresponds to a relatively quiet period.

For example, fortunately and due in part to attempts being thwarted by Israeli security forces, there has not been a completed suicide bombing since 4 October. Yet 24 Palestinians are dead, including six yesterday in Rafah in the Gaza Strip. As we have consistently stated in this forum, Israel's legitimate defence of its citizens must not contravene its duty as an occupying Power to protect the lives and safety of Palestinian civilians. Israeli military operations in populated areas too frequently result in the deaths and injury of non-combatant Palestinian men, women and children. I must stress that both parties must do everything possible to halt this senseless loss of life.

The bloody alternative to peace would only be more additions to the current overall death toll since September 2000, namely, 2,969 Palestinians and 863 Israelis. I hope we will soon be able to provide a briefing that does not need to update these numbers.

This week in Rome, the main donors that provide support to the Palestinian Authority met in the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of International Assistance to Palestinians to review their assistance and consider the current situation. The meeting, generously hosted by the Government of Italy and chaired by the Government of Norway, was attended by high-level Palestinian and Israeli delegations, including the Palestinian Ministers Sha'ath, Fayyad, Masri and Kassis and Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom. Their presence was the most powerful expression yet of the fact that both parties have a renewed desire to engage.

At the meeting, the donors discussed the extent of the economic and humanitarian crisis that they are continuing to help alleviate. I would like to update you on some of the key indicators. Between 2000 and 2002, Palestinian economic losses amounted to an estimated $5.4 billion, the equivalent of one year's worth of total income for the Palestinian economy. Real gross domestic product declined some 33 per cent between 1999 and 2002. Total investment fell from $1.45 billion to $150 million in the same period. Approximately 2.5 million Palestinians are under the poverty line, or about 60 per cent of the total population. Most Palestinians receive some form of assistance, with approximately 40 per cent of the population food insecure. Unemployment runs at about 30 per cent and some half the population cannot access their usual health services.

The donor meeting produced new proposals for assisting the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people. This includes a possible new performance-based trust fund to help alleviate the estimated $650 million shortfall in the Palestinian Authority budget and a proposed new tripartite framework for the donors, the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel to work together in a true spirit of cooperation. Plans for a meeting on Monday within the new tripartite framework have been confirmed. The donors reiterated their commitment to helping the Palestinian people, but they also voiced serious concerns.

The humanitarian crisis has forced donors to redirect funding from development to emergency relief. This in turn is often hampered by Israeli security actions, leading to increased frustration among many donors and aid agencies. Many donors will require a renewed peace process in order to sustain their levels of support.

These humanitarian and other concerns are exacerbated by the continuing construction of the barrier in the West Bank. The Secretariat has regularly

briefed the Security Council on the barrier, pointing out that its construction on Palestinian land and its planned route makes the establishment of a contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State more difficult and increases the suffering of the Palestinian people.

The Secretary-General recently submitted to the General Assembly a report on the barrier (A/ES-10/248) requested by resolution ES-10/13 of 21 October 2003. In that report he said:

> "In the midst of the road map process, when each party should be making good-faith confidence-building gestures, the Barrier's construction in the West Bank cannot, in this regard, be seen as anything but a deeply counterproductive act" (para. 29).

He concluded that due to its continued building of the barrier, Israel is not in compliance with the General Assembly's demand that it halt and reverse construction.

The uneasy calm that has prevailed along the Blue Line since the last briefing to the Council was broken on 9 December, when two Lebanese persons armed with hunting rifles were killed by the Israeli Defence Force after they crossed into the Israeli side of the Blue Line, according to preliminary reports by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. Despite that sad and unfortunate incident and although tensions remain high, developments on the ground suggest that the parties are exercising some restraint. Although Israeli over-flights continue, they have been dramatically reduced in frequency. Also, since the last briefing, Israeli jets violated the Blue Line twice. There were no reports of anti-aircraft fire from the Lebanese side of the Blue Line on either of those occasions. We are hopeful that that relative but uneasy calm reflects a renewed willingness by the parties to avoid escalatory actions. Nonetheless, as the incident of 9 December shows, the potential for such escalation remains high. It is, therefore, of great importance that all parties continue to exercise restraint and refrain from any and all violations of the Blue Line.

Also in the region, President Bashar Al-Assad gave a newspaper interview, in which he called on the United States to revive peace talks between his country and Israel. That was a timely reminder that the objective towards which we are working must be a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, and that we cannot afford to neglect any of the tracks of the peace process.

In the last briefing to the Council, Under-Secretary-General Prendergast characterized the period under review as a lost month in Middle East peacemaking. During the current reporting period an opportunity to make progress has arisen. I fervently hope that the leaders of the two sides will avail themselves of that chance; and I hope that the international community will help them take up that opportunity. In recent years we have seen too many missed chances and squandered opportunities for peace. It would be a pity if in the next briefing, the first of 2004, the Secretariat had cause to cite another lost month. The cost could be devastating. The current hopes for peace among the peoples could be replaced by the creeping paralysis of a hopeless outlook, by a greater hardening of positions and by a deepening of the spiral of violence.

In this situation, time is not the ally of peace. Waiting merely prolongs the suffering. I hope that the parties will recognize the urgent need of bold action and begin immediately to implement effectively the Quartet's road map. I would be delighted if, in its first briefing of the new year to the Security Council, the Secretariat would be able to report that the parties were firmly on the path to a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of this long and painful conflict, based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Roed-Larsen for his comprehensive briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the course of the Council's prior consultations, I now invite the members of the Council to continue our discussion of this matter in informal consultations.

The meeting rose at 11.05 a.m.